

Task Force on the Economic Future of Western Maryland

November 16, 2020; 10 AM

Meeting Minutes

Task Force Members in Attendance:

- Senator George Edwards, *Co-Chair*
- Delegate Jason Buckel, *Co-Chair*
- Jody Sprinkle, *TEDCO*
- Cort Meinelschmidt, *Washington County Commissioner, MACO*
- Shelley McIntire, *Hagerstown City Council Member, MML*
- Al Delia, *Vice President for Economic and Regional Engagement, Frostburg State University*
- Stu Czapski, *Economic Development Specialist, Cumberland Economic Development Corporation, Allegany County Chamber of Commerce*
- Nicole Christian, *President and CEO, Garrett County Chamber of Commerce*
- Andrew Sargent, *Sr. Business Development Representative, Western MD, Maryland Department of Commerce*

Task Force Staff in Attendance:

- Michael Siers, *Economist, Maryland Department of Commerce*

I. Call to Order

a. *Remarks by the Co-Chairs*

The co-chairs welcomed participants to the call. Senator Edwards noted that it was great to see so many participants at the meeting and noted that the end of the meeting would be open for public comment. Senator Edwards noted that each of the three counties was preparing a document on their county's priorities and that these would be sent to Michael Siers, staff for the task force. At present, the task force has received feedback from Garrett County. Delegate Buckel welcomed participants as well and commented on potentially finding ways to bring in new incentive programs and new industries to the region. Delegate Buckel also commented that the amount of state-owned land in Western Maryland reduced the counties' flexibility in designing economic development strategies.

b. *Approval of prior meeting minutes*

Meeting minutes were approved and no objections or edits were raised by members. Michael Siers noted that meeting minutes would be posted on the task force's website.

II. MDOT presentation

Scott Pomento and Matt Baker from MDOT presented to the task force. Scott Pomento noted that Western Maryland's level of organization and coordination is not typical for the state, and that the region should continue its strong relationship with the agency. Matt Baker ran through a number of active projects that MDOT is working on in each county. At the end of the presentation, Commissioner Meinelschmidt asked if MDOT could look into if it was possible for dump trucks to be routed over the I-81 bridge instead of smaller roads during construction. Scott Pomento said he would take that request back and follow up on it, noting that the agency has an excellent working relationship with their equivalents in West Virginia. Senator Edwards thanked the presenters and noted that infrastructure is a big part of economic development and wondered if the presenters could speak on efforts with 220 South. Delegate Buckel noted that a strong North-South corridor is one of Washington County's economic strengths, and that the 220 project would create a similar corridor west of the I-81 corridor which should bring economic development to the region. While Delegate Buckel noted that the project may take some time to establish, he requested MDOT come up with a deadline to develop a plan for what this corridor would look like. Scott Pomento said that MDOT will continue to stress the importance of the project. Finally, Senator Edwards noted that the recent announcement that Pennsylvania would devote more funding to expanding 219 is great news and wondered what Maryland's next steps were. Scott Pomento stated that Maryland's next steps are working with Pennsylvania to understand their plan and timing so that the states can be in lockstep once funding is approved.

III. MD DNR presentation

James McKittrick, Christy Bright, and Kenneth Jolly presented on behalf of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. The presentation highlighted new developments in Western Maryland, including new trails and parkland. Additionally, the presentation highlighted economic impact figures showing the substantial direct economic impact from visitors to Maryland's parks as well as Maryland's forestry industry in the region. At the conclusion of the presentation, Delegate Buckel noted that Rocky Gap is a major state park located next to the casino, a driver of economic activity in the county. A few years ago, a company had been interested in potentially locating a facility within the park, but the process for locating on state land was difficult. Delegate Buckel wondered if there were ways to speed up this process. Christy Bright noted that the state is hoping to release an RFP shortly that would give businesses flexibility to talk about how they could use property in the park. James McKittrick noted that the RFP process would only be as successful as the businesses that participate. Senator Edwards commented on state owned property in the region and stated that the region has had a great working relationship with DNR. Senator Edwards wondered if DNR was looking into ways to increase investment in state parks through a public private partnership where the state leases the park to a private company. Senator Edwards also mentioned that Garrett County would be interested in purchasing property that is state parkland to develop into an economic development park. James McKittrick noted that the agency is in favor of

public-private partnerships but the current procurement process is a limiting factor and that the agency was happy to continue working with local partners regarding the Chestnut Ridge property. Commissioner Meinelschmidt asked for more emphasis on the Civil War Rail Trail. Christy Bright noted that the agency is still working through some property concerns that may take time to resolve. Finally, James McKittrick commented that there are efforts underway to look at making wood-related energy be included in the Renewable Portfolio Standards (RPS), similar to how geothermal energy is. This could induce more economic activity in the region.

IV. DHCD presentation

Kenrick Gordon from DHCD presented to the task force on rural broadband. The Governor has funded rural broadband efforts, having appropriated \$2 million in FY 2019. In FY 2020, the office received \$11.68 million and was able to fund all applications it received, providing assistance to 11 different counties. In FY 2021, the office has an \$11.18 million budget. Kenrick Gordon also provided details on how the grant process works, including the procedure for providing matching funding.

V. Discussion of initial recommendations

Senator Edwards noted that each county would be submitting a list of priorities and focus issues to Michael Siers for review and dissemination. Once these lists are received, the lists should be broken down into groupings for state items, items that are split between state and local responsibilities, and items with local government responsibilities. This overall structure could help frame out the eventual report. Senator Edwards also noted an idea for a Western Maryland Economic Development Fund, that could be funded at \$15 million to \$25 million each year and would be used to fund priority projects in Western Maryland. Funds could be distributed by the Tri-County Council and the Maryland Department of Commerce or Department of Planning could provide agency support. In order to receive funding, Senator Edwards proposed that counties could put in 20% as a potential match amount. For a trial, the program could run for five years. Delegate Buckel commented that additional support from the state could help the region as it works to develop key industries that are of high priority for state policy makers. Delegate Buckel noted that the region is at a disadvantage because its competitors are not Washington DC or northern Virginia, but instead West Virginia and southern Pennsylvania. Policies such as a higher minimum wage and stricter energy regulations hurt the region's competitiveness, so additional support from the state would help.

VI. Next Steps

Delegate Buckel noted that this task force will likely take time to fully develop recommendations, especially in the midst of a pandemic. The task force should begin with "low hanging fruit" and then focus on bigger issues in the spring and summer, assuming the pandemic has subsided. Jody Sprinkle noted that in past groups she has worked on, hearing directly from businesses and other key stakeholders really helps define recommendations and priorities.

The members agreed upon the following timeline:

- By November 20, the counties would send Michael Siers their lists of top priorities and focus issues.
- By December 1, task force members would send Michael Siers their recommendations.
- In early December, Michael Siers and the co-chairs would review and organize these recommendations.
- Around December 10 – 15, during the next task force meeting, the members would review the recommendations and comment on them and approve some of them for inclusion in an initial report.
- After the development of initial recommendations, the task force will continue to meet and focus on longer-term priorities, especially those that rely on working closely with regional stakeholders.

During the next meeting, Nicole Christian requested that a portion of the meeting touch on housing, as this has become a major issue in Garrett County.

VII. Public Comment

Mr. Chip Wood spoke regarding the Civil War Rail Trail and highlighted the importance of the trail for economic development in the region. Mr. Wood noted several documents supporting the rail trail's importance that had been provided to Senator Edwards and Commissioner Meinelschmidt. The two task force members indicated they would pass these documents to Michael Siers so they could be distributed to other members of the task force. Mr. Wood also mentioned a local engineering firm that could potentially help with verifying deeds. Michael Siers mentioned he would pass that information along to the representatives from DNR.

VIII. Closing Remarks/Adjournment